

## Executive Summary

Capacity Development for Research: Strategic Evaluation

# A Partnership of Peers:

## *Organizational Case Study of the International Centre for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA)*

by Stephen Tyler, PhD  
Adaptive Resource Management Ltd.

### Background

IDRC's Evaluation Unit (EU) is conducting a multi-phase strategic evaluation to investigate the Centre's contributions to the development of capacities of those with whom the Centre works. The evaluation aims to provide IDRC's own staff and managers with an intellectual framework and a useful common language to help harness the concept of capacity development and document the experiences and results the Centre has accumulated in this domain. Specifically, it focuses on the processes and results of IDRC support for the development of capacities of its southern partners: what capacities have been enhanced? Whose? How? How effectively?

Phase 4 of the strategic evaluation focuses on the elaboration of six organizational case studies intended to help the Centre better understand how it can best plan for, implement, and evaluate support for its partners' capacity development.

### Research for Development Context

This document reports on an evaluation study of the capacity development activities undertaken by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in its programming with the International Centre for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA). This study is one of six organizational case studies undertaken as Phase 4 of a strategic evaluation of capacity development led by the IDRC Evaluation Unit. The case studies will be used by IDRC staff to improve the design,



*Taking water from the cistern, the old way*

(photo: [www.icarda.org](http://www.icarda.org))

implementation, monitoring and evaluation of capacity development projects and activities as part of the Centre's programming. The case studies will also be

used by IDRC senior management to better understand IDRC's approach to capacity development as a corporate result area.

The International Centre for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA) was established in 1977 and is one of the 15 international agricultural research centres supported by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). ICARDA's mission is to reduce poverty through research and training focusing on sustainable agricultural development in risk-prone and highly variable arid and semi-arid sub-tropical environments in the developing world.

ICARDA's core budget has fluctuated at just under \$US 30 million over the past several years. Research priorities include: (1) technologies that simultaneously improve productivity and sustain natural resources using low levels of external inputs; (2) resource management and productivity practices that conserve soil, water, and vegetation; (3) more diversified farming systems that reduce economic risk, improve resource use efficiency, and provide higher returns; and (4) enhanced quality and added value of farm products, post harvest processing and storage, and employment generation.

ICARDA undertakes most of its research in collaboration with other research partners. While it maintains formal collaboration with dozens of international universities, Advanced Research Institutes, and international agencies, ICARDA also collaborates directly with NARS partners

in the countries in which it works and in regional networks. In addition to collaborative research, ICARDA runs large scale training programs with the objective of improving the skills and capabilities of agricultural research scientists.

ICARDA already sees itself as serving an important regional capacity development (CD) role with respect to NARS in the research domains on which it is focused. It has credibility with regional research organizations, and a strong network of regional scientific and policy contacts.

## Expectations and capacity development strategies

IDRC was a key player in the founding of ICARDA, and has been engaged with the organization ever since. Over the years, the research programs of each organization have shifted, driven by their different mandates and governing structures, but they have consistently found areas of common interest to justify continued collaboration.

There is a high degree of mutual respect in the relationship between IDRC and ICARDA. Senior staff from both organizations reported in interviews that despite its relatively small financial scale, the relationship is a strategic one that is valued by each organization. From its standpoint, IDRC values the regional networks, scientific and administrative expertise of ICARDA. IDRC sees ICARDA as a reliable partner that can deliver quality research

results even under difficult conditions. For its part, ICARDA values the active engagement of IDRC professional staff in shaping projects, because of their research expertise and regional knowledge. ICARDA also appreciates the strong sense of partnership and flexibility demonstrated by IDRC through project support.

ICARDA can justifiably point to its accomplishments and regional leadership in all five of Bernard's (2005) categories of capacity: conducting research; managing research activities and organizations; conceiving, generating and sustaining research in a particular theme or region; using / applying research outcomes in policy and/or practice; and mobilizing research-related policy and programs "systems" thinking. Indeed, *IDRC sees ICARDA as an important strategic partner in the Middle East and North Africa region precisely **because** of ICARDA's relatively*

*Part of the intent in supporting these challenging research themes is often to connect ICARDA expertise to other regional partners.*

*high organizational capacity to manage and deliver complex and rigorous research.*

Because of this relatively strong capacity, IDRC does not emphasize basic organizational capacity development

in its relationship with ICARDA, unlike some other of its research partners. The focus of most IDRC projects with ICARDA is on high quality research and regional networking. Capacity development plays a role in IDRC

projects with ICARDA in two related ways, but this role is relatively minor compared to the focus on research:

1. IDRC takes advantage of ICARDA's strengths to help deliver research projects that involve weak partners in the region. Part of IDRC's intention in structuring projects this way is to reduce risk and improve the quality of research outcomes, but part of the intent is also to build the capacity of the weaker NARS partners through their engagement with ICARDA in the research work.<sup>1</sup>
2. IDRC supports research and networking projects with ICARDA to help strengthen ICARDA's regional role in areas that are of mutual interest to the two organizations, but where ICARDA experience may be limited (e.g. interdisciplinary research, social and gender analysis, participatory research). This is not merely a question of supporting "good research", but of deliberate strategic intervention by IDRC to extend the experience of ICARDA scientists so that they are better able to lead research projects in IDRC priority thematic areas. Part of the intent in supporting these challenging research themes is often to connect ICARDA expertise to other regional partners. This approach therefore links to, and reinforces, the

<sup>1</sup> The fact that IDRC capacity development efforts are targeted not at their grant recipients, but at the recipients' partners, is apparently common (Universalia 2007).

one identified above. In some cases, both approaches were used in the same project.

## Major findings

The main type of CD intervention in these projects was training, typically conducted through specialized workshops. In most cases, this training was specifically tied to the research activities that were the primary focus of the project. The target groups supported for capacity development were mainly NARS partners, and planning and delivery of the CD was generally left to the research project leaders (ICARDA) to organize. The linkages between the training and research, and the engagement of the less experienced NARS in different aspects of the research activities, from planning through implementation and reporting, constituted an important element of the CD exercise. Engagement in innovative and novel research was also an important way for ICARDA staff to build their own capacities for research in thematic areas that were of strategic value to IDRC. While the main entry point for CD was through research organizations, the main targets were individual researchers who could develop their skills and conceptual understanding through both training and engagement in new kinds of research activities. IDRC appears to have had very limited (if any) influence over the selection of the individuals who were ultimately offered CD support through projects

it funded, nor were there any formal obligations on the part of ICARDA to consult IDRC in this matter.

Relationships between IDRC and ICARDA have built on peer-to-peer communications to achieve strategic objectives relevant to both organizations. IDRC support has led to greater expertise (particularly in integrated NRM, participatory research, and SAGA), regional exposure, NARS capacity development and influence for the Centre's development-oriented research priorities; while ICARDA has been able to broaden its multidisciplinary research programs and regional networks, and strengthen analysis or implementation of the development linkages related to its work. These outcomes have been achieved largely as the result of persistence and continuity in IDRC program officers' feedback and suggestions to ICARDA over the course of the project cycle; and as the result of ICARDA's professional delivery of the resulting research, networking and NARS capacity development.

There were four main *processes* through which the Centre influenced the delivery of CD:

- peer-to-peer learning: communications between individual professionals in IDRC and ICARDA through the lens of scientific review during project development and management;
- funding training sessions and learning workshops mainly oriented to individual researchers in NARS;



- leading-edge research: strategic support for particular kinds of research, in order to extend experience, capability and regional influence of ICARDA in these fields.
- networking with other researchers and practitioners to gain synergies from related research and identify new insights and applications for research work.

*The role of IDRC program officers can vary, but tends to be one of sharing critical insights on the work and directing researcher attention to potentially fruitful areas that ICARDA scientists may not have considered.*

tends to be one of sharing critical insights on the work and directing researcher attention to potentially fruitful areas that ICARDA scientists may not have considered. In iterative interactions throughout the project, and indeed often over the course of several phases of related projects, the IDRC program officer builds up professional relationships with ICARDA scientists and contributes substantially to their selection of research topics, choice of methodologies, selection of partners, interpretation of

results and transfer of lessons to other users through networks or workshops.

Assessment of the effectiveness of these capacity development interventions is challenging because in most cases, while they were intentional and transparent, their intended outcomes were not very explicit. Documentary evidence of CD outcomes is sparse for several reasons:

- The explicit objectives of most projects did not include capacity development, so reports focused primarily on research outcomes.
- Those projects with a strong CD component typically justified this in terms of problems or contexts of “need” for this capacity, but seldom monitored whether the CD activities contributed to addressing the need originally identified.
- In the case of enhanced research skills and experience, the CD outcomes were assumed as part of the research project, and were implied by the quality of the research products themselves.

However, by comparing the characteristics of practices in these projects with those identified as representing “good practice” to support capacity development<sup>2</sup>, we can confirm that they were consistent. If the defined good practices are intended to model effective capacity development

<sup>2</sup> IDRC Evaluation Unit 2008

support processes, then one could conclude that, by IDRC's own standards, its capacity development support to ICARDA should have been effective.

Despite the application of good practices, there is little evidence of the persistence of the capacities developed through these projects. It would be very difficult on the basis of the available information to demonstrate sustainability or continuity of the skills developed, either at ICARDA or at its NARS partners. This can be attributed partly to staff turnover in ICARDA itself (departure of experienced staff), and partly due to the lack of followup NARS research programming in countries where security and governance are problematic.

*Both organizations support capacity development, but they seem to conceive of it differently.*

methods and results, are valuable tools for learning and research skills development. Both of these are examples of what IDRC would probably call capacity development (signaling their intent to support specific types of skill sets and methodological innovations), and what ICARDA would see as essential parts of the research enterprise, or "research-as-usual". There is

little disagreement about what is going on between the organizations, but they label it differently.

In addition, the support to NARS capacity development as part of a broader research project is largely a reflection of what IDRC sees as "good practice". IDRC would expect support in such cases to include broad engagement in research issues, including problem identification, analysis, communication of results, and networking. On the other hand, ICARDA seems likely to view capacity support primarily in terms of training, with engagement in data collection or analysis to follow.

## Implications

Both organizations support capacity development, but they seem to conceive of it differently. When ICARDA identifies that it has a capacity development role in its relations with NARS, it may mean something qualitatively different than what IDRC typifies as good CD practice. This is likely to lead to divergent expectations in projects where NARS capacity development is a significant element of the work program and could lead to misunderstandings and frustration on both sides.

IDRC staff tend to treat capacity development more like a set of “good practices” than as a focused strategic outcome of programming investments. There is considerable attention during project development and initiation to CD intent, and to processes of peer-to-peer interaction, inclusion, training and shared learning in the course of undertaking collaborative research. But it is often not clear what types of capacity IDRC expects to be enhanced through a project, and outcomes of CD are typically not clearly identified or reported by either IDRC or by ICARDA.

## Looking ahead

IDRC’s programming strategy with ICARDA focuses on research that explores challenging integrative methods, builds bridges from science to participatory

*The skills needed for these kinds of projects are not only new research skills, but conceivably also skills in coordination, training, coaching and mentoring, and in cross-cultural communications.*

development, encourages multidisciplinary, sharpens social and gender analysis in natural resource management, and then builds and transfers these novel and challenging approaches in regional networks and supportive interaction with weak NARS. The skills needed for these

kinds of projects are not only new research skills, but conceivably also skills in coordination, training, coaching and mentoring, and in cross-cultural communications. It appears from IDRC’s choice and design of projects with ICARDA that it is trying to foster such skills through collaborative research and training. However, without identifying explicitly together the skills and tools that are needed to support capacity development of NARS, it may be difficult for IDRC and ICARDA to hold a discussion about how to do this better.

This subject would seem to offer potential for further dialogue between the two organizations. ICARDA may be interested in exploring how to conceptualize, define, measure and evaluate its own approach to CD, for purposes of program planning, accountability and management effectiveness. IDRC may have lessons to share from this strategic evaluation.

## Methodology

The fundamental unit of analysis is the research project, around which most professional interaction, resource flows and strategic decisions in both organizations are made. The study sampled all IDRC / ICARDA projects from the past 12 years meeting these criteria:

- Project documentation available.
- Objectives explicitly or implicitly included capacity building.
- Formally or substantively complete.
- Most recent phase only in multiphase projects.
- Exceeds median value of all projects (i.e. substantive).

This resulted in a sample of four projects. All IDRC projects with ICARDA have been funded from the ENRM program area, almost all of them by RPE.

Information about ICARDA context, relationship with IDRC and project interaction between IDRC and ICARDA staff was derived from reports prepared by Dr R. Mackay. These were based on a thorough document review and from interviews he conducted between July and November 2007 with IDRC and ICARDA staff and stakeholders in Cairo, Aleppo and Ottawa. Additional information specific to the sampled projects came from project documentation and from 7 new interviews with current and former IDRC and ICARDA staff.

Analysis relied on the research capacity typology developed by Bernard (2005), on the characterization of IDRC capacity development by Neilson and Lusthaus (2007) and on the Evaluation Unit's synthesis of "good practices" for capacity development (IDRC Evaluation Unit 2008). The main limitations of the methodology were that it relied largely on previously collected data and that it examines practices rather than outcomes (in the absence of much evidence about outcomes).